

SENATE EDUCATION

EXHIBIT NO. 2

DATE 1-12-11

BILL NO. SB44

Statement of Support for SB 44 – *Received by the Office of Public Instruction*

January 12, 2011

As a member of Supt. Juneau's Student Advisory Board, I am in full support of the Senate Bill 44 to change compulsory attendance from 16 to 18. This will change the fact that our drop out rate is 5.1% for Montana State, and over 2,000 kids in grade 7 – 12 drop out every year.

If we really think about this when you are talking about a 16 year-old they are only in 10th grade. How does this give them a fair enough chance to graduate and get a High School diploma? It's sad to say, but it really doesn't help you at all if you drop out and think you can make it all on your own with no educational background to get by. If you drop out you will end up not going to any type of schooling, either end up with nothing, or a really bad job that doesn't even get the bills paid.

Dropping out for these kids is a way out and it has to be stopped. They think leaving school will fix all their problems but it will really still be there in the end. This needs to be passed because it is so very important for Montana students to get their fullest educational future possible.

Changing the age will not only stop it but lower the drop out rate and make sure students stay in school to get what they need out of it.

I agree with Ms. Juneau a 100% and will back her up with changing the age from 16 to 18 years of age. She is truly trying to help out students and make Montana a better place to go to school.

Statement made by: High School Student Emma Briggs of Bigfork, Montana

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Dear State Legislature:

It is an honor for me to write this letter in support of increasing the dropout age from sixteen to eighteen. As a school counselor I am passionate about this issue because in my job I often deal with the emotional turmoil of our children who drop out of high school. I see the aftermath of a poor decision made in haste by a child who was not ready for the burdens that have now been placed upon them.

I have never known a student that has dropped out to become successful. That's not to say that it can't happen, but I know those situations are very few. When a student is sixteen they are usually in their sophomore year of high school. Can you remember what was important to you at the age of sixteen? How many decisions did you make that you later regretted and wished that you could take back? Most sixteen year olds are not mature enough to make a decision that will affect the rest of their lives. The majority of my sixteen year old students can't see past the upcoming weekend.

Teenagers are in the mind set of immediate gratification and instant solutions to problems. It is not until they have matured that they realize that it takes hard work to accomplish a goal and the easiest solutions may not be the best solutions. It takes maturity to learn that one poor decision has consequences that can affect them for the rest of their lives. Leaving the dropout age at sixteen is asking an immature teenager to make a decision that they are nowhere near mature enough to make.

Schools are not just a place where children learn reading and arithmetic anymore it is sometimes the only safe place for our children to be. Those of us who work in the education system often have many roles; we are teachers, mentors, counselors and even parents to our students. Take away this support for a sixteen year old who is already struggling and you have allowed a child to make the decision to destroy his or her future.

Research shows that most of our students who drop out are facing challenges at home such as extreme poverty or drug and alcohol abuse or a combination of all three. We know that it is hard for these students to focus at school when they are wondering what life will have in store for them when they get home. These students are focused on surviving an almost impossible situation. By allowing these children to drop out at the age of sixteen only compounds those issues. Students who drop out are faced with not being able to escape their situations and often fall in the same cycle of extreme poverty and drug and alcohol abuse. Sometimes the teenagers who are dropping out are bringing babies into the world. They often think that dropping out will allow them to work to support their families. What they don't realize is that there are very few jobs that will hire someone without a high school diploma. What often happens with teenage parents is that they begin to receive government assistance in order to support their families. Without a High School Diploma the odds of them getting off of government support are very small.

The Montana GED program is not a solution that is working in my area. I have had students say to me "I will just drop out and get my GED." What they don't realize is that getting a GED is not a realistic option for most students who live in rural Montana or on Reservations. For example for our rural school the closest GED class offerings are 28 miles away and the closest GED test center is 44 miles away. If I am sixteen and a dropout with no money and no car how am I going to get there? Even if I have a car I will need to be able to afford the gas and the insurance it takes to legally operate one and how am I going to do that without a job?

The office of public instruction has very clear rules in defining what it takes to get a Montana GED, here is a quote: "The GED Tests, developed by GEDTS, require extensive preparation and the demonstration of a high level of high school knowledge and academic skills. In Montana, the GED Tests are administered only at Official GED Testing Centers under the direction of the Office of Public Instruction." If I am dropping out my sophomore year of high school how am I going to have the knowledge that is required to pass the GED test? By allowing our children to drop out at the age of sixteen we are opening the door to their failure.

Raising the drop out age to eighteen is not going to cost our education system more money. We can create programs within our schools that support our youth. As a matter of fact most schools have already designed intervention and prevention programs for At Risk Youth. The problem is by allowing them to drop out at sixteen it doesn't give the school enough time to develop a prevention plan for a particular student. As it is now the youth will come in and say, "I am dropping out" and then they're gone. I believe raising the dropout rate to eighteen gives the school the tool they need to recognize the problem, develop a plan and work with that struggling teen until they are eighteen and ready to graduate. Each person who works with a youth in the education system whether it is our state legislature, parents, teachers, administrators and counselors, we all play a crucial role in creating an environment in which a student feels comfortable enough to succeed in. If we raise the drop out age to eighteen then it is up to us as educators to do everything we can to make sure our students are successful. I believe the majority of Montana educators are willing to do that. I would rather our state send a student out into the world as an adult and ready to face life's challenges than send a student out as a child and tell them to figure it out.

Thank You,

Corinne K. Turnsplenty

School Counselor for the Bridger School District



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Montana PTA's Position Statement on SB44

Chartered 95 years ago, Montana PTA is the largest volunteer child advocacy organization in the state of Montana. We represent approximately 6,500 parents and child advocates in local PTA units across our vast state. We are strictly a non-partisan organization whose sole purpose is to promote the welfare of children and youth in schools. Montana PTA's mission statement is: We empower communities to work together for children and families through education, leadership, communication and advocacy. Montana PTA's vision statement is: "Montanan's working together for the future well-being of all children."

Montana is one of a small number of states that allows students to legally drop out of high school at age 16. Montana PTA believes the school environment significantly impacts students' academic achievement; therefore, Montana PTA supports raising the compulsory age of attendance for their child to be the student's 18th birthday. Families cultivate high expectations in support of their student including high school graduation. This vision and innovation is needed to transition a student's education into future success.

Families want their students to do well in school and become successful adults, but need options, flexibility and career-relevant course work in their school setting. Every student should be afforded every opportunity to graduate from high school while being adequately prepared for and encouraged to pursue postsecondary education including different pathways such as adult basic education and the GED, Job Corps, Youth Challenge and apprenticeships as supported in Senate Bill 44.

Fundamentally, studies show high school graduation substantially increases one's long-term earnings potential, lowers incarceration rates, and benefits society as a whole through lessening the burden on social safety net programs.

We join this action to engage students, parents, teachers, administrators and community leaders to make sure schools are meeting students' needs to prepare them for success in the 21st century and to be productive members of our communities.

We are delighted to support state Sen. Taylor Brown, R-Billings, on Senate Bill 44.

Please vote yes on Senate Bill 44.

Dee Hensley-Maclean, Montana PTA President